George Washington's Tear-Jerker

By JOHN R. MILLER

CIVILIAN control of the military is a cherished principle in American government. It was President Obama who decided to increase our involvement in Afghanistan, and it is Congress that will decide whether to appropriate the money to carry out his decision. It is the president and Congress, not the military, that will decide whether our laws should be changed to allow gays and lesbians to serve in our armed forces. The military advises, but the civilian leadership decides.

Yet if not for the actions of George Washington, whose birthday we celebrate, sort of, this month, America might have moved in a very different direction.

In early 1783, with Revolutionary War victory in sight but peace uncertain, Washington and the Continental Army bivouacked at Newburgh, N.Y. Troops were enraged by Congress's failure to provide promised back pay and pensions. Rumors of mutiny abounded.

On March 10, an anonymous letter appeared, calling for a meeting of all officers the next day to discuss the grievances. Within hours came a second anonymous letter, in which the writer, later revealed as Maj. John Armstrong Jr., an aide to top Gen. Horatio Gates, urged the troops, while still in arms, to either disengage from British troops, move out West and "mock" the Congress, or march on Philadelphia and seize the government.

When Washington learned of the letters, he quickly called for the meeting to be held instead on March 15 — to give time, he said, for "mature deliberation" of the issues. He ordered General Gates to preside and asked for a report, giving the impression that a friend of the instigators would run the show and that Washington himself wouldn't even attend. He spent the next few days planning his strategy and lining up allies.

But just as the meeting of approximately 500 officers came to order, Washington strode into the hall and asked permission to speak. He said he understood their grievances and would continue to press them. He said that

many congressmen supported their claims, but that Congress moved slowly. And he warned that to follow the letter writer would only serve the British cause.

The officers had heard all this before — the letter writer had even warned against heeding Washington's counsel of "more moderation and longer forbearance." The crowd rustled and murmured with discontent. Washington then opened a letter from a sympathetic congressman, but soon appeared to grow distracted. As his men wondered what was wrong, Washington pulled out a pair of glasses, which even his officers had never seen before. "Gentlemen," he said, "you must pardon me, for I have grown not only gray but blind in the service of my country."

The officers were stunned. Many openly wept. Their mutinous mood gave way immediately to affection for their commander.

After finishing the letter, Washington appealed to the officers' "patient virtue" and praised the "glorious example you have exhibited to mankind." He then strode from the hall. His appearance probably lasted less than 15 minutes.

An officer quickly made a motion to thank the commander for his words and appoint a committee — all trusted Washington aides — to prepare a resolution carrying out the general's wishes. The motion passed, and the committee soon returned with a resolution damning the anonymous letter and pledging faith in Congress. The resolution was adopted by roaring acclamation and the meeting adjourned.

This wasn't the end of the Army's intransigence: several weeks later, Pennsylvania militiamen marched on Philadelphia and forced Congress to flee to Princeton, N.J. But with the story from Newburgh fresh in their minds, the mutineers quickly developed second thoughts and went home. True to his word, Washington pursued the Army's grievances, though with mixed results — Congress voted a lump-sum pension payment and disbanded the force.

Given Washington's near universal popularity, word of his speech spread rapidly, and civilian control of the military soon became a central priority in

the formation of the young Republic. Six years later the new country adopted a Constitution that implicitly recognized civilian control.

But powerful armies often make their own rules, and many nations have succumbed to military control despite strong constitutions. In the United States, it was the story of Newburgh and Washington's iconic status in our early years that so firmly established a tradition of civilian control in the minds of both our military and civilians. That tradition continues, a testament to our first, finest and most political general.